



News Release

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Masks required for all K-12 students and staff heading back to the classroom

OLYMPIA – Safely returning to the classroom for full time in-person instruction this school year is important for students, teachers, and staff. Today, the Washington State Department of Health (DOH) released [updated guidance for the 2021-2022 school year](#). DOH's guidance aims to minimize transmission and maximize in-person instruction and is informed by the latest science, recently released Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidance, and recommendations from the American Academy of Pediatrics.

Vaccination is the strongest protective measure against COVID-19 available. Everyone 12 and older is eligible for the COVID-19 vaccine. As of July 24, 35% of 12-15-year-olds and 44% of 16-17-year-olds in Washington state were fully vaccinated. Those who have not been vaccinated are encouraged to [make an appointment](#) as soon as possible.

While children who get COVID-19 typically have milder symptoms than adults, children do get COVID-19 and can transmit it. Severe disease is rare, but some children require hospitalization. Further, the Delta variant, which spreads more than twice as easily from one person to another compared to earlier strains, has surged to become the predominant variant in Washington. Given this, the high mixing of vaccinated and unvaccinated people in schools, and the fact that vaccines are not available to children younger than 12, universal masking is required in all Washington state K-12 schools.

To protect those who have not been vaccinated and reduce risk of transmission, public and private K-12 schools must use the following layered prevention strategies:

- All school personnel, volunteers, visitors, and students must wear cloth face coverings or masks regardless of vaccination status when indoors and on school buses.

- Schools should maintain at least three feet of physical distancing between students in classroom settings, to the degree possible and reasonable, that allows for full-time, in-person learning for all students.
- Schools must have good ventilation and indoor air quality, cleaning and disinfecting procedures, and continue to encourage frequent handwashing and good respiratory etiquette.
- Students and school employees who have symptoms of COVID-19 or the flu should stay home and seek medical attention, which may include COVID-19 testing.
- Schools must have plans in place to quickly respond to COVID-19 cases among students and staff.

Quarantine protocols have been updated to limit student exclusion from the classroom. Students do not have to quarantine if symptom free and: they were at least three feet away from an infected student and both students were wearing masks, the student is fully vaccinated, or if the student had a confirmed case of COVID-19 within the past three months.

“The goal of these layered prevention strategies is to protect people who are not fully vaccinated, including students, staff, and their families from COVID-19 infections,” said Deputy Secretary Lacy Fehrenbach. “Outbreaks can and have occurred in K-12 schools. These measures limit transmission in schools which will minimize the disruptions of quarantines and classroom or school closures caused by outbreaks. It is important we do everything we can to keep our classrooms safe, students and staff healthy, and schools open.”

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